

---

# Clients' Critical Moments

Colin Bertie, Andrew Day, Erik de Haan and Charlotte Sills  
Ashridge Centre for Coaching

## Abstract

67 past and present clients of executive coaching wrote to us about the *critical moments* they experienced, and 8 of them were then interviewed by us. Our analysis of their critical moments indicates that

- For Clients Critical Moments are not an obvious concomitant of all good coaching.
- When Critical Moments do occur they are generally positive and described as part of the internal process of the Client, unless they were provoked by concrete actions by Coaches which the Clients regarded as unhelpful and insensitive.
- Critical Moments are often linked to sudden realisations and *insight*, both by explicit reference and by the metaphors used.

We conclude from this result that Clients often relate their positive outcomes to an increase in insight and realisation, which is not a trivial conclusion as many approaches in executive coaching are geared towards other outcomes (such as problem-solving, strengthening of existing solutions, remedial help or active support).

## Introduction

We know from our earlier research **1** with 130 Executive Coaches that Coaches often experience Critical Moments in their coaching work. By 'Critical Moment' we mean a sudden shift or interruption to a coaching conversation – one that feels significant and urgent, exciting or disturbing. It seems that coaches frequently find these Critical Moments to be turning points in their work with clients; either they are generative or they lead to a deterioration in the Coaching Relationship.

We are however aware that little research has been undertaken in the field of coaching that explores the experience of coaching from the clients' point of view rather than the coaches' - and no research which investigates Critical Moments in the Coaching relationship from the Client's perspective.

So we embarked on a fourth research study whose purpose was to investigate whether coaching clients are aware of Critical Moments and, if they do, what is their experience of these moments.

## What we know about critical moments from the Coach's perspective

Our previous research with Coaches **1** has shown that critical moments are usually:

- 
- Unexpected and unforeseen by the Coach;
  - Associated with heightened emotions for the Client and the Coach.
  - Tension-provoking in the relationship between Coach and Client.
  - Frequently associated with feeling anxiety and doubt about how to respond in the moment.

Coaches often reported that their clients were experiencing insight and learning during or after these moments, although sometimes they led to the breakdown of the relationship and even the termination of the coaching. When comparing moments that resulted in learning and insight to moments that resulted in the breakdown of the coaching relationship, we observed that the key difference seemed to be presence or absence *shared reflection at the point of tension*. When coach and client were both able to reflect on what was happening in the moment or had just happened, learning and insight was often the result. When, however, either the Coach or the Client allowed their anxiety to result in e.g. aggression or withdrawal, a breakdown in the relationship often resulted.

From a theoretical perspective the research demonstrates the importance of the dynamics of the co-created *relationship* between Coach and Client. This research also highlighted the importance of what is called *reflexivity* in coaching: the ability to experience and reflect on one's inner world at points of heightened emotion.

## **The current research**

Would coaching clients report the same experience?

In order to find out, we used two different inquiries in order to get first hand accounts of clients' experience of critical moments in coaching relationships. The first stage was a short survey asking participants whether they had experienced a critical moment as a coachee and, if they had, to write us a short description of it. The survey was sent to a sample of approximately 10,000 managers who are members of the Ashridge Alumni and to approximately 150 graduates of the Ashridge Coaching-for-Organisation-Consultants programme.

The second stage of enquiry consisted of interviews with selected individuals that had described a critical moment and some who had indicated they had not experienced a critical moment at all.

We then coded each critical moment to identify themes and significant participant comments. The whole team took part in the coding in order to make sure that there was enough consistency – in fact, inter-rater reliability was between 0.32 and 0.49 which is considerable when one realizes that we had 40 codes and raters were encouraged to use as many codes as they could per critical moment.

## **Findings**

### ***A critical moment for the researchers!***

---

The first surprise was that in total we received only 67 completed responses. What was more, 20 (a third of respondents) indicated that they had not experienced a critical moment in their coaching. The issue of critical moments was clearly not as significant for coaching clients as it was for coaches.

We were intrigued. We decided to include in our phone interviews some participants who had not experienced a critical moment.

### ***Slowly growing insight in an atmosphere of support***

Each of these individuals reported positive experiences of coaching. They all felt that their coaching had been useful in helping them tackle issues and problems in their work roles. They did *not* experience an ‘abrupt’ or ‘sudden’ moment of insight or learning. Instead, they each reported that they experienced a gradual process of insight and realisation about their issue during the coaching process. They each felt that upon reflection they had learnt something about themselves as a result of the coaching experience. For instance, one person described the experience in the following way:

*“No I have never felt exhilarated by anything that happened in a coaching session, it was more a sense of support. I certainly haven’t crossed any critical barriers in such sessions”.*

### ***Self-awareness and insight emerge from critical moments***

Across the 59 reported critical moments, respondents were most likely to report that the critical moment contained an instance when they became more aware of themselves, their pattern of behaviour or the consequences of their behaviour in their organisations. Many participants referred to a ‘realisation’ or ‘revelation’ (16 of the 40 codes, taking an amazing 43% of our coding). As with the experience of Coaches, these moments often emerged suddenly or abruptly in the process.

There were two major areas of personal realisation:

- 1. Personal realisations about issues** (18% of assigned codes). This includes new knowledge, understanding, or insight into a situation, understanding of others’ or ideas about strategies. For example:

*“It was related to my confronting a very challenging issue and both being very concerned about my ability to deal with it and also the sense of liberation I felt to be able to navigate my way to a resolution. It was very charged and quite emotional as I had to face up to an issue that in the past I have chosen to avoid, but the process of expressing it verbally helped enormously, coupled with the positive and supportive environment created by my coach”.*

*“In solving a problem that was causing some doubt in my ability. A breakthrough in understanding that my approach to this situation was based on previous experience and that an alternative was out there which could stretch me as an individual and achieve greater long term results. This gave greater confidence in tackling other issues without a preset agenda”.*

---

**2. Personal realisations into and about self** (20% of assigned codes). This includes recognising unhelpful patterns of relating, personal 'hang-ups', impact on others.

*"Something that had been holding me back suddenly seemed such an easy thing to overcome".*

*"Following a discussion on my response to an individual that I was having extreme difficulties managing, it became clear to me that my response was one that I had been repeating throughout my career, changing that one response has changed my entire management style over time. The results have been very tangible".*

These realisations or insights were often accompanied by strong emotions, including 'painful awareness', 'elation', 'liberation' and 'relief'. They were usually about the coachees themselves, which seems to support our earlier inference that the area of focus (personal or external) of the Coachee may influence the likelihood of a critical moment emerging.

### ***Few references to the Coach or their actions***

We were again surprised that very few of the respondents who described 'positive' critical moments referred to anything the coach had done around this time. This is in marked contrast to the research with Coaches where the participants nearly always described their own actions and interventions before, during and after the critical moment!

We can only speculate about the reason for this. Realisation, insight and awareness come from within the person. The Coachee may not therefore recognise or feel that the Coach played a direct role in this process. Furthermore, we believe that the emergence of this heightened understanding happens only when there is a strong coaching relationship (as research into psychotherapy and coaching outcome indicates), in which case the Coachee may find it very difficult to identify specific interventions or behaviours of the Coach leading up to or during the critical moment.

Interestingly, in the case of 'negative' critical moments, all felt that Coach's unhelpful or insensitive actions such as would damage the trust in the relationship, had led to the negative outcome.

### ***Participants use 'metaphor' to describe critical moments***

We became intrigued by the way that participants used metaphors to describe their experience of critical moments. Frequently, they used images or ideas from one area of life or 'conceptual domain' to help them to describe their emerging experience **2**.

The conceptual domains that were used most frequently were

1. Revelation (e.g. "Light bulb moments")
2. Visual (e.g. "How other people view me")

- 
3. Journey (e.g. “Sort of **avenues** that were open to me”)
  4. Physical Space (e.g. “**Point** in time”)
  5. Agency (e.g. “In **charge** of your own destiny”)

We were reminded of Aristotle’s distinction between two fundamentally different forms of change **3**. He argued that change can consist of:

1. Movement from A to B or quantitative/qualitative additions, sometimes called ‘progress’ or ‘a journey’; or
2. A change in nature or substance, sometimes called ‘a transformation’.

In reviewing the clusters of metaphors we observed that they varied on these two dimensions and on the dimensions of support and challenge, with more than a third of the metaphors hinting at the second form of change and at challenging, i.e. again at learning through realisation / revelation, in other words the acquisition of new insight.

## Conclusion

Many Coachees do experience moments that they would describe as ‘critical’, although many do not. In other ways, this research supports the findings from our earlier research with Coaches: critical moments seem to afford points of realisation, insight and heightened awareness for the Coachee. We would argue that the absence of references to the Coach’s role is linked to the presence of a quality relationship (or working alliance) between Coach and Coachee rather than specific techniques or actions on the part of the Coach.

## References

**1** See our earlier publications:

- Day, A., De Haan, E., Blass, E., Sills, C. and Bertie, C. (2007). Critical Moments in the Coaching Relationship: Does Supervision Help? In press.
- De Haan, E. (2006). *Magic Moments*. In: *Coaching at Work*, November/December 2006, pp. 49-52.
- De Haan, E. (2007). *Point of impact: how should coaches deal with turning points in coaching sessions?* In: *Coaching at Work 2.3*, 2007, pp. 40-42.
- De Haan, E. (2008a). “I doubt therefore I coach” - Critical moments in Coaching practice. In: *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, in press (Spring 2008).
- De Haan, E. (2008b). “I struggle and emerge” - Critical moments of experienced Coaches. In: *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, in press (Spring 2008).

**2** See Lakoff, G. (1993) *The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor*. In A. Ortony (ed.) *Metaphor and Thought 2nd Edition*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 202-251.

**3** Aristotle spoke of ‘accidental’ versus ‘substantial’ change. See e.g. his *Physics*, Book III.